

September 2019

## Fifty Years Ago, When Newport Remembered Rochambeau

John R. Wadleigh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory>



Part of the [Diplomatic History Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wadleigh, John R. (2019) "Fifty Years Ago, When Newport Remembered Rochambeau," *Newport History*. Vol. 54 : Iss. 184 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory/vol54/iss184/3>

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. It has been accepted for inclusion in Newport History by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@salve.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@salve.edu).

FIFTY YEARS AGO,  
WHEN NEWPORT REMEMBERED ROCHAMBEAU

by

JOHN R. WADLEIGH

On 11 July 1980 Newport hosted the year's major Bicentennial event, the landing of the French army under General Rochambeau on American soil. The most important Bicentennial event of 1981 takes place 19 October at Yorktown, Virginia where that French army from Newport combined with General George Washington's Continental army to defeat British forces under Lord Cornwallis, bringing about the end of the American Revolution and setting the stage for a free United States of America.

Fifty years ago both of these events were celebrated as part of our nation's Sesquicentennial. In 1930 Newport recalled the French landing with local festivities including a parade and speeches with fireworks on Washington Square in the evening of the 11th of July. However, there was no official participation by French units such as we witnessed here last summer. It was not until the next year, after French officials and a naval squadron had participated in the Sesquicentennial of the Battle of Yorktown, that Newport, on 27 October, was the scene of what an officer of the Newport Historical Society described as "The Third Coming of the French".<sup>1</sup>

Early in the summer of 1931 as plans for the Yorktown anniversary were publicized, Rhode Island's delegation in Congress, led by Newport's Representative Clark Burdick, working through the State Department, invited French officials coming to Yorktown to visit Newport either before or after their stop in Virginia. Later in the summer the French accepted, and it was announced that Marshal of France Henri Petain, the hero of the great Battle of Verdun in World War I, would visit Newport on his way home to France. On his staff would be descendants of General Rochambeau and other officers who had landed in Newport in 1780.

This writer recalls witnessing some of the ceremonies attendant to the French visit on a clear and chilly day fifty years ago this October 27th. Promptly at eight in the morning the new French cruisers, Duquesne with the French Marshal embarked, and Suffren flying the flag of Rear Admiral Descotes, stood up the bay past Fort Adams. With the Stars and Stripes at their foretops,

the ships fired a national salute of 21 guns. Gun for gun the salute was returned by a unit of the 10th Coast Artillery at the fort. Already at anchor off Jamestown were the modern U.S. heavy cruisers, Chester and Pensacola, the former carrying U.S. General of the Armies, John J. Pershing, Petain's escort on his American visit.

Two hours later Petain, his staff, and a landing force from the French warships debarked at King Park where the Marshal laid a wreath on the recently completed Rochambeau monument, a gift in the name of the Newport Historical Society by the Society's generous president, Dr. Roderick Terry. As Petain, Pershing, and other dignitaries were driven through Newport to the City Hall, a parade of French and United States military units followed. Newporters were used to the "regulars" of the Infantry from Fort Adams with their snappy band. They were also used to the Naval Training Station band and the marching recruits but, the high-pitched bugles of the "fanfare" (bands) of the *Infanterie de la Marine* from *Duquesne* and *Suffren* were a novelty. The music and marching of the French units were truly reminiscent of Rochambeau's five regiments in that year of 1780. The headline in the Daily News, "NEWPORT WELCOMES FRENCH VISITORS — City Again Thrills to Tread of Troops From France" told the story of that October 27th fifty years ago.<sup>2</sup>

Petaín's staff included General Guy de Rochambeau of the French Army and the Marquis de Grasse, both direct descendants of the 1780 French leaders. They were both particularly interested in visiting historic spots associated with that "First Coming of the French", led by their ancestors. Trinity Church, the Hunter House, and Robinson House were among places welcoming the visitors. Our own Historical Society building, decorated with crossed French and American flags played host to the visitors that afternoon. At Hunter House a special wreath had been hung by Mlle. Aline de la Bassetiére, a direct descendant of the Chevalier de Ternay, Admiral of the French Fleet who resided and died there in 1780.

Late in the afternoon Rear Admiral Harris Laning, President of the Naval War College and senior U.S. Naval Officer present, welcomed the visiting delegation at a review of the Training Station's regiment of recruits. Most appropriately it was Navy Day, the birthday of Theodore Roosevelt. Before the regiment

passed in review the Admiral spoke briefly noting that "Navy Day was a part of Newport, a town where the Navy had its roots."<sup>3</sup>

On the morning of the 28th Marshal Petain had a press interview on board *Duquesne* after which the French cruisers headed homeward. At Petain's cabin entrance stood a French sailor, armed with a battleaxe, continuing the four hundred year old tradition of the French army that only a Marshal of France is thus honored and protected.<sup>4</sup> As *Duquesne* and *Suffren* steamed past Brenton Reef lightship, Newport could be proud of Petain's words, "Nowhere in the United States had he been received as warmly and sincerely as in your 'city by the sea'".<sup>5</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

1. NHS Bulletin #82, January 1932 — "The Third Coming of the French". Lloyd W. Mayer, Librarian and Asst. Treasurer.
2. Newport *Daily News*, 27 October 1931.
3. NHS Bulletin #82.
4. Newport *Daily News*, 28 October, 1931.
5. Ibid.